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ABSTRACT

Project Mainstream, a regional program for adolescents with severe special needs, aimed for maximum integration through involving students in common activities. A peer tutoring program was implemented based on needs of high school students for involvement, information, instruction, independence, and interaction. Peer tutors were instructed regarding behavior modification, data-keeping, emergency procedures, leisure and communication skills, performance levels, and individual differences. Beginning with one-to-one experiences, peer tutors gradually expanded to small group activities. The program was designed to be beneficial to both tutors and the handicapped students. The program helped to increase knowledge and acceptance of students with severe special needs. (CL)

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PEER TUTORING AND THE SEVERE SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENT: A MODEL HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAM

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Since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, Public Law 94-142, we have witnessed a growth in programs and services for students with severely handicapping conditions. Guided by the concepts of the least restrictive alternative and age-appropriate placement, classes for the severely handicapped have appeared in selected public school systems in the United States (Biklen, 1983). Attending classes in public school settings with non-handicapped peers offers to the severely handicapped student many more opportunities not available in other, more segregated settings (Brown, Ford, Nisbet, Sweet, Donellen and Grunwald, 1983). The potential for interactions with non-handicapped persons, including peers and adults, is one such opportunity which is of critical importance to the students and to special education teachers.

In a recent review of the literature, Stainbeck and Stainbeck (1981) make several statements regarding peer interactions in public school settings:

- interactions between severely handicapped and non-handicapped persons do not occur spontaneously when students are housed in the same buildings
- interactions or at least contact between severely handicapped and non-handicapped students can influence attitudes toward the handicapped positively
- interactions can be enhanced by educational programming and by restructuring of the students' environment

These statements suggest that placement of classes for students with severely handicapping conditions in a public school is not sufficient to insure that interactions will occur. Rather, the implication is that specific attention must be paid to integrating severely handicapped students and to making certain that

interactions occur.

Project Mainstream: Innovation in an Urban High School

When Project Mainstream, a regional program for adolescents with severe special needs was established in 1982 at Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School (CRLS), the project staff developed specific strategies for encouraging interactions between handicapped and non-handicapped students. CRLS, with 2700 students, is well-known for its diversity of program offerings, its multi-cultural population, and its wide-ranging special needs programs; Project Mainstream, however, was the first and only program at an urban high school in the greater Boston area for students with severe special needs. Severe mental retardation, physical and language disabilities, seizure disorders, and overall low functioning are some disabling conditions demonstrated by the students. In its first year of operation, Project Mainstream had two major goals:

1. To provide a functional and comprehensive curriculum for severe special needs students.
2. To familiarize high school faculty, staff and students with the needs and abilities of severe special needs students, involving them in mainstreaming activities whenever possible.

Committed to the concept of maximal integration, project staff implemented the following basic activities throughout the first academic year:

- eating in the cafeteria with non-handicapped students
- attending holiday events
- performing errands in high school accompanied by staff
- attending social/recreational activities with other less-handicapped special needs teenagers
- using the gym, track, field house and pool

- changing classes at the same time as the other high school students

These basic activities ensured that all Project Mainstream students were involved in some high school activities weekly.

In addition to the above, Project Mainstream staff met with department heads, spoke to groups of faculty at monthly meetings, and prepared an information sheet for faculty, administrators and staff. The goal of these efforts was to provide accurate information about severely handicapping conditions, student goals, and suggestions for interacting with the often non-verbal Project Mainstream students. Interest, curiosity and concern were evident on the part of the high school personnel at these meetings; teachers appreciated the information and voiced their support for the project. As a result of these carefully planned initial steps, the Project Mainstream students were quietly accepted into the high school and were tolerated in all activities. What was missing, however, was positive and active interpersonal interaction with the high school faculty and students. Little opportunity existed for non-handicapped students to meet and become involved with the Project Mainstream students. To provide an avenue for interaction, a Peer Tutoring Program was developed specifically with the needs and abilities of the high school community in mind.

Planning and Implementing Peer Tutoring Program

Although other examples of peer tutoring programs exist (Stainback, Stainback and Hatcher, 1983; Campbell, Scaturro and Lickson, 1982), most are at the elementary or middle school level. Peer tutoring at the high school level presents some distinct and unique problems which must be recognized. First, the decentralized and departmentalized nature of a large, urban, campus high school presents scheduling and organizational problems. Second, high school students

frequently experience peer pressure to dress and act alike, and to socialize only with specific groups. Students who look or behave differently are often ridiculed or ostracized. Third, many high school students are actively involved in sports, clubs, part-time work, social activities, or caring for younger family members, leaving little room or energy for peer tutoring. Fourth, peer pressure is especially strong in a high school; a few teenagers "turned off" to the severely handicapped can influence the attitudes of a much larger social group.

In order to circumvent and overcome these difficulties, Project Mainstream staff worked closely with students' advisors and the community-based Learning Program, which offers internships and work activities for credit. In addition, the Peer Tutoring Program was tested on three students who worked in February and March; their needs, interests and reactions were taken into consideration when planning the actual program in Spring, 1983. Keeping in mind that a few high school students "turned on" to working with the Project Mainstream students could exert a very positive influence on their friends, the Peer Tutoring Program was implemented in Spring, 1983.

Peer Tutoring Program: Overview

The CRLS Peer Tutoring Program is scheduled around the high school's quarterly marking periods of approximately nine weeks' duration. It addresses the specific needs of high school students for:

- involvement
- information
- instruction
- independence
- interactions

Project Mainstream staff believe that given information, supervision and a chance to work in small groups with other students, Peer Tutors can develop skills and

friendships with the special needs students. Five or six peer tutors can be accomodated in each quarter, with each student working two to four times a week.

Specific start and end dates are established to provide clear limits for new peer tutors, who are expected to complete at least one nine week session. Table 1 shows an outline for a sample nine week session, during which tutoring is combined with instruction, and the individual styles of both sets of students is stressed. Content areas such as behavior modification, data-keeping, emergency procedures, leisure and communication skills, performance levels and individual differences are introduced. Peer tutors are supervised in class by the Head Teacher, and they meet every four or six sessions with the Project Manager. Each tutor works primarily with one special needs student at a time, and gradually learns to work and play in small groups.

Table 2 lists a series of activities in which tutors and special needs students might interact. These activities involve helping interactions and service interactions (Brown, et al., 1983). By focusing on helping and service, the tutors learn skills which enable them to interact in a positive and profitable manner with the severe special needs students. These helping and service interactions can and do lead to reciprocal and friendly interactions in the hallways and at other events.

Peer Tutoring: A Mutually Beneficial Activity

The benefits of this program to the high school tutors and to the severe special needs students are many. Of particular importance are the following key areas.

What do the peer tutors learn? They learn a great deal about the activities which occur in a self-contained classroom for students with severe special needs. They learn that teaching is not easy, that it takes thought, planning and patience

Table 1

Sample Schedule

Week 1: Introductory meeting with Project Manager
RE: Project Mainstream: Goals and Objectives
Role and Expectations of Peer Tutors
Observation in Classroom

Week 2: Classroom sessions: Tutors participate in on-going activities in classroom, paired with an instructional aide or teacher. Tutors introduced to notices on bulletin board for classroom information and assignments; briefing on emergency procedures.

Week 3: 2nd meeting with Project Manager
RE: Session on mental retardation
Sample goals and objectives for individual students
Classroom sessions: Work with students following same activities as week 2.

Week 4: Classroom sessions: Continue to work with same group of students and teacher (or assistant). Write down questions. Classroom staff will demonstrate data keeping.

Week 5: 3rd meeting with Project Manager: Answer questions; discuss behavior modification and its use in classroom. Continue classroom sessions.

Week 6: Project Manager observe peer tutors in class; give feedback; offer suggestions. Discuss keeping of data.

Week 7: Continue working in classroom, using suggestions from week before. Independence in working with students stressed.

Week 8: Classroom sessions. Final meeting with Project Manager, summing up. Discussion of what experience meant for Peer Tutors; Tutors jot down comments. Thoughts and suggestions.

Week 9: Wrap-up of classroom sessions.

Table 2

Activities for Peer Tutors:

1. Assist in general classroom routine.
2. Play games during leisure time with students.
3. Participate in pre-vocational teaching and work sessions.
4. Participate in language/academic lessons.
5. Go to lunch with Mainstream students.
6. Take Mainstream students to do errands or to cafeteria for snack.
7. Assist in taking students to CRLS activities.

and skill. Tutors learn alternate forms of communication; they learn to feel silly while trying to remember a new signed word or phrase. They are exposed to possible career choices in the field of special education, physical, occupational and speech therapy.

In addition to specific skills, tutors are exposed to many new values and attitudes regarding persons with severely handicapping conditions. In the course of their in-classroom work, they see teachers and aides treating students with respect, not pity; they learn that "helping" does not always mean performing an action for another person, but also means providing the means for that person to do it himself. Tutors become part of a group of adults and teenagers playing a game during leisure time, or sitting enjoying rock music and a Coke during break. Peer tutors gradually learn to relax with handicapped students, enjoying their company as one would with friends inside or outside the high school.

For the students in Project Mainstream (or any other severe special needs program) the benefits are equally important. Peer tutors become friendly faces in a crowded hallway or cafeteria, someone with whom to talk and walk. Peer tutors become models for dress, behavior, and conversation; the special needs students have many more opportunities for one-to-one learning and social interaction within the classroom. Finally, the students with severe special needs gain in stature by being accompanied to classes and activities by non-handicapped persons. With the assistance of a peer tutor, the Project Mainstream students can interact with non-handicapped students in full view of high school faculty and staff, in a positive and reciprocal manner.

An additional result of this particular Peer Tutoring Program at CRLS was that the high school students acted as unofficial advocates for the Project Mainstream students; when high school students asked questions, the peer tutors

could often answer. In addition, their demonstrated tolerance for and acceptance of the Project Mainstream students exerted a positive influence on their friends, who could then be seen saying hello in the halls or outside while waiting for buses.

This Peer Tutoring Program, of relatively small size in a large high school, had the intended effect of increasing acceptance and knowledge of students with severe special needs in the high school setting. As a result, some of our future parents, teachers, doctors, clerks, relatives and neighbors now have had a positive experience with people with severely handicapping conditions; it has helped create positive images and attitudes among the non-handicapped population. Viewed from this perspective, a Peer Tutoring Program is an investment in the future: in the futures of high school students and students with severe handicaps. The benefits of such a program involving increasing numbers of high school students are well worth the time and energies committed to it. It is time well spent.

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